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Colby: I Wasn't Secretive Enough

In William E. Colby's account, it was his lack of the superspy's customary secretiveness that brought about his downfall in 1975 as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

If anything, he suffered from an excess of candor, Mr. Colby said in memoirs, parts of which were published last week. He wanted to tell Congressional and executive-branch investigators what he knew about such agency abuses as domestic spying and mail monitoring, he said, but the Ford Administration preferred to "stonewall;" the result was his dismissal. He quotes former Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, who headed a Presidential commission investigating illegal domestic operations, as having once asked him, "Bill, do you really have to present all this material to us?"

Whatever its accuracy — Mr. Rockefeller denies having tried to obstruct the inquiry — Mr. Colby's recollection is more than an historical footnote. It goes to the heart of a continuing controversy: How much should the agency reveal? Mr. Colby has been more flexible than other agency officials about talking in public, but flexibility has its limits. The agency was less forthcoming than it might have been when he was director.

Another indication of this pervasive tradition came last week in a report that for several years the agency had recruited American blacks to spy on the Black Panther Party in the United States and Africa. Neither the Rockefeller Commission nor the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence mentioned this sensitive subject in its final report, raising new doubts about thoroughness. In interviews, members of both panels said they were told nothing about the use of American blacks for espionage overseas, to which one agency official responded, "They didn't ask."

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